

Integration

The True Story Of Prince Edward County

VIRGINIA

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Editor's Note: The article below was published in the Washington World, 53 D St., N. W., Washington, D. C., a national weekly digest of current events. It was written by Scott Hart, son of James L. Hart, publisher of The Farmville Herald from 1892 to 1921. Scott Hart, a veteran newsman, magazine contributor and author, includes much historical background of Prince Edward County making it of special interest to Herald readers.

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Summers are long and hot in Prince Edward County. The people feel the hell of heat smothering the Virginia tobacco fields and creeping along the edges of shade. It's too hot for controversy. In the offices and along the streets of Farmville, they talk of baseball and President Johnson and Goldwater and weather and Washington.

Washington has pushed them once more to the brink of decision over schools. Prince Edward alone among the 3,070 counties of the United States closed its public schools in 1959. Since that date the word "school" has been the bete noir of the people there.

On June 16 of 1964 the Scripps-Howard "News" in Washington said "What Prince Edward is pleading is not financial poverty but poverty of spirit and intellect. . . its officials have adopted a policy of ignorance . . . inappropriate to the state which prided itself on being 'the mother of Presidents.'"

"Somewhere along the way, the mother gave up . . . Five years of makeshift schools, or no

schools at all, exact a fearsome price."

This freehand billingsgate is not new to the people of Prince Edward. It is nevertheless a distortion difficult for them to understand, since it turns upon two misrepresentations (a) Prince Edward is deficient in "spirit and intellect" (b) Prince Edward denied its Negro children the opportunity to go to school.

Probably no county in Virginia has an intellectual tradition so ancient and so vigorous as Prince Edward. Its Hampden-Sydney College was founded in 1775. Graduates of that college founded or succored the Princeton Theological Seminary, the Medical College of Virginia, the University of Richmond, Transylvania College in Kentucky—the first west of the mountains—and the Medical School at Randolph-Macon College.

While "The University," as the state institution at Charlottesville is called, generally has been attributed to the initiative of Thomas Jefferson, its co-founder was Joseph G. Cabell, an alumnus of Hampden-Sydney

College, class of 1825.

Eleven other colleges or theological seminaries in New York, Mississippi, Texas, West Virginia and Kentucky grew from the efforts of Hampden-Sydney graduates. And Farmville, county seat of Prince Edward, has been the site of the state normal school since 1884. Now called Longwood, using the estate Longwood—home of the Confederate Army's famous Gen. Joseph E. Johnston—as its recreation center, the teachers' college is an integral part of the town life.

Ironically, in ordering the Prince Edward public schools reopened by September, the Supreme Court has told the Federal court at Richmond to implement the order. Richmond move against Prince Edward? Richmond, which owes its medical college and its university to Hampden - Sydney? Richmond, once tipped toward secession in 1860 by the spirited leaders of Prince Edward County?

Lacking in spirit? When whole blocs of the so-called Baptist belt rose in bigoted wrath against the Presidential candidacy of Alfred E. Smith in 1928, Prince Edward coolly voted for him. Methodist Bishop James Cannon, a trader in prohibitions and prejudices, came to Prince Edward to give one of his "the Pope will rule the land if Smith is elected" speeches, and was pelted with vegetables and eggs for his pains.

Tolerance has been the county's core since its founding in 1753. The early inhabitants addressed a petition for religious liberty to the Virginia House of Delegates in 1776, urging in part "that you raise religious as well as civil liberty to the zenith of glory, and make Virginia an asylum of free inquiry, knowledge and the virtuous of every denomination."

A second source of puzzlement to the residents of Prince Edward is the belief that the coun-

ty denied schools to its Negro children. County leaders say that education has not been denied anyone. The county's Negro pupils, outnumbering the whites, were offered private schooling when private classes were established in 1959 for white children.

There, say the citizens is a fundamental fact almost entirely ignored in the hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles that brought the county's undesired prominence. In 1959, a letter was sent to every Negro parent saying, in part:

"It is our intention to set up good schools, get qualified teachers, and, so that the Negro children of this county will not lose time from school, to run these schools at least 180 days, which is a full school year."

With the letter went an application for school enrollment. Thus was established — by attempt at least — the "Southside Schools, Inc.," for colored children.

Few outsiders other than readers of The Congressional Record have ever heard of it. The public press worried at one theme—that 1,600 Negro children were inhumanly denied an education.

Sen Harry F. Byrd (D-Va.), told the Senate: "When this letter went out, Oliver W. Hill, the Negro lawyer representing the NAACP in Richmond, and Roy Wilkins, NAACP executive director from New York, made a hurried return to the county. They showed up at a Christmas party for the county's colored children on Dec. 23, 1959. Hill used such an occasion as the Christmas party for colored children to tell their parents that "some benighted individuals are trying to entice you away from your rights by promising you a private school. All you are losing is one or two years of Jim Crow education, but at the same time in your leisure you can gather more basic education than you would in five years of Jim Crow schools."

To the invitation, response came from only one Negro child.

Byrd declared: "Accepting this kind of outside guidance for their 'advancement,' instead of the offer of assistance from their white neighbors who want to work with them for the establishment of schools, the colored people of Prince Edward have ignored educational opportunities provided for them.

"Noting the clear indications of intimidation by the NAACP—when only one application for enrollment was received—officials of Southside Schools, Inc., promised that the identity of applicants for enrollment would not be disclosed until the schools were open. But even this did not result in any more applications," Byrd said.

In the uproar, Prince Edward became the best known county in the U. S., to its dismay. The Prince Edward story, its people contend, has been inaccurately told. Reporters have said that their on-the-scene accounts were rewritten and slanted by their editors. Comments Rep. Watkins M. Abbitt (D-Va.):

"The people of Prince Edward have tried to emphasize that they are not seeking to break the law but are trying to preserve constitutional government. There has been no violence. The citizens have been subjected to perhaps the heaviest pressure brought to bear against any community in the U. S. in many years. The forces of the federal judiciary, the Justice Department, and most of the executive branch of the government have been pitted against the people. I believe that eventually history will show that the cause for which the county has fought will win the commendation of many communities in the U. S."

The Farmville Herald, the county's only newspaper, has said: "The issue is not the people versus public schools . . . The issue is the control of public schools. The question is: Will

public education be controlled by the people who pay for it, or by the federal courts, which under pressure of organized minorities threaten to dominate it?"

The issue, whatever its merits, has brought such attention to the county that its name is abbreviated to "Edward" in headlines coast-to-coast with readers knowing what is meant. The county consequently has become self-conscious in the spotlight — and its business leaders wonder about the effect. They believe that the aggregate effect of the heavy unfavorable publicity sets them off as a congregation of woolhats inhabiting an area of scrub pine and gullies, where Negroes are purposefully tormented and deprived.

They answer: in the county's seven districts, real estate is owned by 2,475 white persons and 1,891 Negroes. In two of the districts, ownership rests with 464 Negroes as compared to 329 whites, and 424 Negroes as compared to 358 whites.

Residential areas of the two races in Farmville exist as in so many Southern towns, side by side. Many Negroes maintain their premises meticulously. Some don't — which is among their rights.

Said a Farmville man whose ancestry dates from the town's founding in 1798, and who grew up with Farmville Negroes: "I have noticed lately a strange thing. Some of the colored people are turning distant, even to me. I pass them and they don't look at me." He seemed puzzled.

There was never any trouble between the races in the county, not even during the Reconstruction era. Then the wrath of the whites was directed against whites who came in from the outside to exploit the conditions.

Indeed, the county points with pride to a Negro native son, Dr. Robert R. Moton, long-time president of famed Tuskegee In-

stitute, and recipient of an honorary degree from Harvard.

The county has been a spawning and gathering ground of important people. Patrick Henry and John Randolph of Roanoke lived there. All told, the county produced eight governors of states:

Abner Nash, of North Carolina, second governor under the Constitution; Patrick Henry, Virginia, 1776-9; Henry Watkins Allen, Louisiana, 1863-5; Thomas W. Ligon, Maryland, 1854-8; Sterling Price, Missouri, 1853-7; William W. Bibb, Alabama, 1817-20; Philip W. McKinney, Virginia, 1890-4; and George Walton, 1789-90.

John Caldwell became an early lieutenant governor of Kentucky. William Henry Harrison, ninth President of the U. S., spent his childhood in the county, and was graduated from Hampden-Sydney College.

People of the county quietly smile when Prince Edward is referred to as "backward." There have been no dynamitings, they remind, such as have occurred in Tennessee and Alabama, nor any rock throwing, as in New Jersey. The NAACP, the county people say, went to the courts. The county did nothing less.

The county, with a population of approximately 15,000, has been characterized as "poor" almost consistently in reports since the desegregation troubles. Actually, Farmville, with a population of 5,000, is the largest of the three dark-fired tobacco markets in the state.

In one average year, \$1,523,774 was paid to tobacco growers from the local warehouses. Lumber products bring in excess of \$1 million. Retail sales in the town have climbed annually to nearly \$20 million. Other business volume (professional, serv-

ices, manufacturers, and mills) last year added \$12,549,550. Three banks have assets exceeding \$19 million.

On a map of Virginia's 98 counties or a map of the U. S. and its 3,070 counties, Prince Edward looks small, a slight 357 square miles of rolling land and tiny villages, inhabited by people with a friendliness so instantly noticeable that the correspondents even mentioned it.

Why did the deathgrapple with the Supreme Court of the United States occur there? As likely places stand in a dozen other states. Say, only, that in 1954 a thunderhead formed in the sky, lightning flashed and struck and there is little explaining the ways of such things.

It is a good guess that the schools' doors will reopen, with scant integration. The existing private school will draw probably 98 per cent of the 1,250 white pupils. The 1,600 Negro students—served by a privately-financed school during the last year—may be back in a public school. And the situation would be just about what it was to begin with. All that resulted was an uproar.

A few sum it up, like this: "I don't know what we'll do." Three words grow repetitious . . . "I don't know." But one man, maybe speaking for many said, "You can throw a rope on the ground and pull it. It will come every time. But try to push that rope. Nobody can push that rope. Or push anything."

The expectation of reopening the public schools is based on a firm statement by one of the leaders in the long contention. "We have never been defiant of the law. We simply put the desegregation ruling to its furthest test — in the courts. We shall abide by a final decision."